

Remarks on Signing the Education Flexibility Partnership Act of 1999 *April 29, 1999*

Thank you. Let me say, first of all, I thank Dr. Metts for being here, for giving us a first-hand and concrete expression of what this bill will mean to the States of our country and to the local school districts. I thank the Members of Congress who have spoken, Senator Wyden, Senator Frist, Congressman Roemer, my old colleague Congressman Castle.

We're delighted to have the Vermont education commissioner here, Marc Hull, along with Senator Jeffords and Senator Kennedy and a very large delegation of Republicans and Democrats from the United States Congress, from the Senate and the House. I'd like to ask the Members of Congress just to stand so the rest of you will see how many people here worked on this bill.

You know, there have been days in the last few years when I'm not sure we could have gotten this many Members of Congress to agree that today is Thursday. *[Laughter]* This was a truly astonishing effort, and I want to thank them all.

I want to say, too, a special word of appreciation to Governor Carper and a very profound thanks to Secretary Riley. He and I started, as I have told many people, working on education reform together 20 years ago this year. And over the last 20 years, we have done our best to sort out what we ought to do and how we ought to do it and where the responsibility for what particular action ought to lie.

And I suppose, if I could put it into a sentence, I would say that insofar as possible, when it comes to the education of our children in kindergarten through 12th grade, the beginning of what should be done, should be done by the States, and "how" should be decided by the local districts, but basically, whenever possible, by the local principals and teachers and parents involved in the schools; that the Federal Government is called upon to meet the needs that States can't meet on their own, the needs of poor children, children with special needs, or to fill in the gaps when there are crying national needs unmet; and that when substantial Federal dollars are involved, it's okay for the Federal Government to say "what," too. But we should all be singing out of the same hymnal,

insofar as possible. And we should all remember that all education, in the schools at least, occurs in the classrooms, in the libraries, on the schoolyards, among the students and parents and principals.

I think it is quite remarkable to see the places where you're really seeing a turnaround now, where you have high expectation, high standards, discipline, and genuine accountability for the students and the teachers and the principals. You also see a dramatic attempt to cut the cost of education where the money's being wasted and to increase the investment in education where more is needed.

One of the things I'm very proud of that Secretary Riley has done is, independent of this bill we're signing today, is to slash the paperwork burdens on State and local officials by well over 60 percent since he has been the Secretary of Education, while putting an even more ambitious agenda before the educators of America.

Now, the Founding Fathers understood that this would be a big debate; we'd always be having this debate. Thomas Jefferson once said, "Were we directed from Washington when to sow and when to reap, we should soon want for bread." I may have liked that even more when I was Governor, but it still sounds pretty good to me. *[Laughter]*

But the framers understood something else, too. They understood that the country had a right to decide and had to decide from time to time what we were going to do, maybe not when and how but what. They believed, for example, in 1787 that education was an important national purpose and declared that all new territories must put aside land for public schools, thereby establishing the fact that education, though a State and local responsibility, must be a national priority.

This Education Flexibility Partnership Act exemplifies, I think, the Founders' vision of how a properly balanced Federal system of government can work, providing freedom from Federal rules and regulations. This new law will allow States and school districts not just to save administrative dollars, with less headache and red-tape, but actually to pool different funds from

different sources in the Federal Government. But by demanding accountability in return, it will make sure States and school districts focus on results.

Now, Doctor, you mentioned one example. I'll give you an example from my own life that made me so strongly for this bill. In 1990 or '91 when I was Governor, the Department of Education under President Bush gave us permission in a very small, very poor rural school district to take all of our Federal funds at elementary schools, including the Chapter I funds and some of the special ed funds, and put them together and take class size down to 15 to 1, in a district where the test scores were low and the learning was tough.

And this little district had a formula—they also actually had an idea that even 6-year-olds could be used to teach other 6-year-olds to read and to learn their alphabet and do basic writing.

And I should tell you that in this first grade class—they had a rough means of testing the children in the first grade, to test their basic competencies—and there were four children in these four first grade classes that had been held back for a second year. Everybody else was in the first grade for the first time.

And so we did this. Here's what happened. The four kids that were held back scored 4 times as high on their basic competencies as they did. All the Chapter I kids scored 3 times as high, and the overall classes did twice as well as the previous year's class.

It was a wonderful thing, except I couldn't do it everywhere in the State. And I said to myself—I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. See, here we had discovered something that is profoundly important. I got all the help that I think the Federal Government could give me at the time. And we did the best we could to take those lessons, in the absence of the Federal funds, and apply them.

We want to produce results. We want our children to learn. We want all of our kids to be able to learn to the maximum of their ability, which means that they can learn at a world-class standard. And we need to give people who are on the ground, working with the kids and committed to that, the chance to do it. And if they're not, and the money's being misspent under this law, then we'll revert to another system.

But that is the meaning of this. This can change children's lives. And again I say, I am

profoundly grateful to everyone who had anything to do with it.

I hope that—now, we're getting off to a good start, and we'll keep on doing this. Last year, at the end of the year, we made our first big downpayment on providing 100,000 more teachers, so we can have smaller class sizes. We're going to have to hire 2 million new teachers in America in the next few years, with a growing student population and increasing retirement among teachers. This is an important contribution to that effort.

I hope we can pass the bill to modernize or build 6,000 new schools, because we've got a lot of schools that are too old, some of them even too old to take the computer hookups that have now been made everywhere in Delaware, as you heard the doctor say.

I hope that we will reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to reflect the lessons learned in Chicago and elsewhere and ask the schools that receive these Federal funds to end the practice of social promotion but to increase the efforts to help children through after-school and summer school programs and mentoring programs, to turn around or shut down failing schools, and to ensure that we do more to see that our teachers know the subjects they're charged with teaching.

The greatness of this country has always been the promise of opportunity for everyone who is willing to work for it. Today, you not only have to be willing to work for it, you have to know enough to achieve it. Therefore, there is no important responsibility that should have greater weight on our minds as Americans, without regard to party and without regard to whether we work in the National Government or the State and local government or the smallest rural school or the biggest inner-city school or whether we're just taxpaying citizens, with or without children in those schools—there is nothing more important for us to be focused on today than making sure that very early in the next century we can look at each other straight in the eye and say—and believe and be right about saying—that it is possible in America, in every community, to get a world-class education.

Thank you very much.

Now, I'd like to ask the Members of Congress to come on up, and we'll sign the bill. Come on.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:04 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Dr. Iris T. Metts, secretary of edu-

cation and Gov. Thomas R. Carper of Delaware. H.R. 800, approved April 29, was assigned Public Law No. 106-25.

Statement on the Report of the Working Group on Financial Markets

April 29, 1999

As part of our ongoing efforts to increase opportunities and reduce risks in the global economy, we have focused on ways to strengthen the world's financial system. Today I welcome the Working Group on Financial Markets' report entitled "Hedge Funds, Leverage, and the Lessons of Long-Term Capital Management."

The report contains a number of policy recommendations that are designed to reduce the potential risks of excessive leverage, as demonstrated by the near-collapse of long-term capital management. By enhancing transparency in

the financial system, by increasing the amount of information made available to the public, and by improving risk management on the part of financial institutions, we can help reduce these risks. Taken together, the report's recommendations are an important step in our efforts to promote more secure financial markets. This report is the result of a collective effort by all of the Federal financial regulatory agencies. I want to commend the Working Group for this thoughtful report. I look forward to working with Congress on these important issues.

Statement on Proposed Legislation To Waive the Federal Government's Claim to Tobacco Settlement Funds

April 29, 1999

I am disappointed that so few States are devoting tobacco settlement funds to reducing youth smoking, as shown by the new report from the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids and the American Heart Association. This new report underscores why I strongly oppose any legislation waiving the Federal Government's claim to tobacco settlement funds without a commit-

ment from the States to fund youth tobacco prevention efforts. In the absence of such a commitment, States won't have to spend a single penny of the \$246 billion tobacco settlement to reduce youth smoking. We must act now: Every day, 3,000 children become regular smokers, and 1,000 will have their lives cut short as a result.

Interview With Katie Couric of the National Broadcasting Corporation

April 29, 1999

Gun Control Legislation

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, first of all, thank you very, very much for talking with us this afternoon. We really appreciate it.

Senator Trent Lott called your proposed gun control legislation the typical knee-jerk reaction, and Congressman Tom DeLay accused you of

exploiting the issue for political benefit. You would say to them?

The President. That's ridiculous, and down deep they know it. I think—you know, what I tried to say the other day is that we have a culture with too much violence in it for our children, and we need to address that, television,